



James Rosenquist, *Highway*, 1977 Oil on canvas, 60 x 144 Courtesy Mr Morris Miller

# AUTO-ICONS

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DOWNTOWN BRANCH WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

AUTO-ICONS was organized by the following Helena Rubinstein Fellows in the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program: Steven Litt, Brown University; Kathleen Monaghan, University of California, Santa Barbara; Simon Scanes, University of Hartford, with the assistance of other Fellows in the program: Amy Benenson, Vassar College; Bradley Collins, Harvard University; Barbara Dau, Dartmouth College; Pam Gruninger, Dartmouth College; Matthew Mc Lain, University of Cincinnati; and Lynne Shapiro, Brandeis University.

The Downtown Branch of the Whitney Museum of American Art is operated under the direction of David Hupert, Head of the Museum's Education Department, and Lisa Phillips, Branch Manager. The Downtown Branch, located at 55 Water Street, is supported by the business community of lower Manhattan and the National Endowment for the Arts. It is open Monday through Friday from 11:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. Admission is always free.

The appearance of the automobile as a theme in postwar American art arises from two sources: the purely visual appeal of the sleek glass and steel surfaces of the auto and the desire to isolate and draw attention to the car as a cultural symbol. In art the automobile is presented both as a fascinating formal object and as a highly charged artifact of a consumer society. As a result of its ubiquitous presence the automobile has become an icon of popular culture which conjures up an enormous range of associations. Cars are so many things to us; to quote journalist Tom Wolfe, "They are freedom, style, sex, power, motion, color—everything is right there."

By using an item of popular culture, artists incorporate into their works nuances of the subject's social, economic, and political meaning. Everyone has some knowledge of the automobile whether as a basic means of transportation, a source of pollution and congestion, a status symbol, or an emblem of the machine age. Artists provoke responses to the automobile by subjecting it to a wide range of transformations and depictions which may celebrate, condemn, or record aspects of the automobile's contradictory presence.

The works in this exhibition recall many fantasies and rituals in which the car plays a vital role as an ego extension, a mode of escape, a key to rites of passage, or a family fixture. They also document the stylistic development of autobiography styles and follow the car from mint condition on the show room floor to its demise on the junkheap. The junkyard is then mined by some artists who dismember the auto hulks and fashion their components into new objects which retain a persistent reminder of the prior roles of the parts.

Don Eddy, in his 1971 painting *Private Parking #X*, records the effects of the interplay of light and shade on the glossy flanks of several new Volkswagens sitting in a dealer's parking lot. He contrasts these forms with the forceful patterning of a chain link steel fence and a credit card sign which dominate the foreground. While Eddy's work may address the notions of ownership, private property, and the ease of making purchases on credit, it speaks just as directly of purely visual concerns. *Private Parking* demonstrates the painter's concern with reconciling the frontality of the fence and sign with the deep space of the parking lot.

Eddy belongs to a group of painters which have been called "Photorealist," or "Radical Realist," that came to the fore in the early seventies. Photorealists base their works on slides or photographs, not on direct experience of things as they exist in space. This method results in works emphasizing highly finished surfaces in which every square inch of the canvas is given equal attention in the precise rendering of minute details. It is as though the true subject of Don Eddy's painting was not the cars themselves, but the photograph of the cars.

James Rosenquist's 1977 painting *Highway* presents a different attitude toward its subject. In this work the automobile is slowly being filled with a rich treacly substance, thus identifying a glutinous foodstuff with the streamlined contours of the automobile. The juxtaposition of the two, of food and auto, brings to mind the idea of "fast food" typical of the roadside pitstops which dot the highway, while also suggesting the many kinds of cravings that mass-produced commodities attempt to gratify. Rosenquist incorporates into this statement the language of advertisements which stimulate desires through subliminally erotic closeups of pouring ketchup, syrup, and cake batter. In *Highway*, the unexpected combination of the automobile with such sensuous imagery is a jolting reminder of the more manipulative aspects of mass media.

Although Rosenquist's *Highway* was painted after Eddy's *Private Parking #X* the former is linked to the Pop art sensibility which typified the sixties. "Pop" is an art of incorporation and displacement in which images from mass culture are transferred from the environment and altered as they become part of the artwork. Pop artists like Rosenquist, Andy Warhol, Tom Wesselmann, and Robert Rauschenberg explore and expand the sign systems of mass communication, ironically animating the ambivalence of twentieth-century man to the products of his own ingenuity. Their work subverts the traditional canons of taste by imitating the look of comic books or advertisements. In Rosenquist's *Highway*, the artist's preference for this mode can be seen in his use of the stagey sidelighting and blow-up techniques reminiscent of the vernacular language of billboards and movies.

The difference between Rosenquist and Eddy, and by extension between Pop Art and Photorealism, indicates a significant shift in attitudes toward subject matter in postwar realist painting. While Pop focuses on a love/hate relationship with the results of the machine age, Photorealism stresses the process of translating a two-dimensional image from a photograph into paint. Where Pop is often critical and ironic toward its subject matter, the Photorealist vision is more neutral. Ostensibly, a human face would be just as interesting as a car bumper to the latter sensibility. As the prominent Photorealist Richard Estes puts it, "this is a cold abstract way of looking at things without comment or commitment." Similarly, Don Eddy argues that the subject plays an incidental role in his work, that it is, as he says, "dictated by the kind of painting problems I'm interested in."

Both Don Eddy and John Salt show a special predilection for the visual qualities of automobiles. The repeated appearance of the automobile in their works and the absence of the human form suggests meanings other than the strictly formal ones claimed by Eddy. In Salt's and Eddy's works, a variety of connotations emerge as a result of their different presentations of the car. When



viewed at close range *Private Parking #X* by Eddy contains many highly reflective automobile surfaces which dissolve into a maze of distorted landscapes. The image as a whole, however, suggests the attractiveness of a bright, new car. Eddy's Volkswagens are so factory fresh, that they evoke the pleasure of choosing a new car and taking it for a demonstration ride.

Conversely, John Salt is interested in the crumpled, spray-painted surfaces of used and discarded automobiles. His *Purple Impala* of 1973 exhibits his technique of representing spray painted car bodies by using an air-brush. For Salt, as for Don Eddy, the automobile is a "very obvious subject," although he does not paint it "because it is important or because it has some kind of message." Even so, Salt's *Purple Impala* brings to mind the way cars are abused and casually cast aside in a painting that hints at a mood of listlessness and boredom.

In contrast to the connotations of newness or transience in the works of Eddy and Salt, Andy Warhol's *Silver Car Crash* of 1963 is a more overtly provocative image. In it, Warhol suggests the numbing quality of mass-media news by

repeating an image of a grizzly auto accident to neutralize its horror. The painting openly displays the vacuity of reproductions of images describing shocking events by setting up an equivalence between the silver void on the right side of the canvas and the grainy silk-screened images on the left. Warhol's choice of the car as subject matter displays an understanding of its power to provoke an involvement with the artist's intentions.

Although artists may have a variety of attitudes towards the automobile, by recording it in their works they remind us of the ability of auto styles to age quickly. Cars are molded, streamlined, polished, and painted to appeal to the fantasy of the buyer. Each model year becomes part of the popular environment as it lives out its life span. The elaborate fins, headlights, and chrome crustations of fifties automobiles crystallize different historical moments when Detroit designers were seized by enthusiasms for different features of airplane design. Such body styles inspire nostalgic reveries as they pass out of favor.

Photographer Langdon Clay senses this about automobiles, and this in part explains his enthusiasm in documenting them. "I suppose I am obsessed by the power of a clear simple record," says Clay, referring to his night portraits of parked cars. Clay also gives a sense of the personalities of the absent car owners in his work. The Corvette in *Blind Vet*, 1978, has a certain low-slung machismo, and we can feel the careless attitude of the owner of the salt stained car parked in the harshly lit glare of a sooty winter street in *Meatball*, 1978.

As automobile advertisements suggest, car names personify or mask the identity of the owner in the same way that autobody styles do: "Get into a Mustang and something gets into you." Model names hint at the dark presence of an animal soul lurking beneath the hood: Impala, Jaguar, Cougar. Other animal names signify an atmosphere of rationality and domestication: Pinto, Rabbit, or Colt. Still other model names conjure up images of exotic locations, like Monaco, Malibu, or Seville. Car names summon up a whole variety of ways that cars can speed, gallop, fly, or explore; they seem to embody the restlessness of the road, with its promise of freedom and the ecstatic release of high speed movement.

The cult of movement inspired many writers including John Steinbeck, Vladimir Nabokov, and Jack Kerouac. The automobile facilitated the exploration of the entire continent, making the flat plains of Texas, Louisiana bayous, and Mexican jungles all the more accessible. Kerouac summed up in his novel *On the Road* the fascination of the young generation of postwar America, the Beat Generation, with the possibilities of the automobile. Kerouac spent much of his own life criss-crossing the continent on binges of experience, recording



Don Eddy, *Private Parking #X*, 1971  
Acrylic on canvas, 66 x 95  
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Monroe Meyerson

what he saw in his writings. Often, there is a sadness in his work which imparts the freedom of his travels with a quality of lonely transience:

“What is the feeling when you’re driving away from people and they recede on the plain till you see their specks dispersing? It’s the too huge world vaulting us, and it’s goodbye. But we lean forward to the next crazy adventure beneath the skies.”

Kerouac was a friend of photographer Robert Frank, and Frank also traversed America recording the world of the Beat Generation. Frank’s work recalls the photographic journeys of Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange during the depression, but he does not seek the pathos of the earlier documentarians. Instead, Frank records the affluence of the mid-fifties in which the automobile is the focal point of teenage rituals or an object of veneration, as in *Long Beach, California*, 1956. If these images seem sad or poignant perhaps it is because they serve as a reminder of how fast things change in America. The young man in *Ann Arbor, Michigan*, 1956, with his comb so rakishly tucked into his belt must be in his late forties by now.

William Eggleston’s haunting images are also the record of a photographer’s travels. His photographs of Mississippi are fragments, incidents, and vignettes from everyday life that yield unexpected power in images such as *White Door*. The familiarity of Eggleston’s subjects are transformed by his careful choice of lighting and composition. Although *Pink Ford* serves as a sign for the syndrome of waste in society, it is printed with a palette as delicate as a watercolor.

The sculpture of John Chamberlain similarly contains contradictory effects. The crumpled steel in his work recalls the violent origins of the sculptor’s materials and of the risks we take by traveling at such high speeds in vehicles that are veritable tin cans. These associations remain, like shadows, in sculptures that are ultimately concerned with sculptural issues of mass, color, and surface.

The artists and photographers discussed above isolate and focus on the automobile. By contrast, Hsiang Ning Han’s painting *New Car Depot, N.J.*, 1976, presents an image of the statistical scale of the automobile’s presence in America. Here is a crowded factory parking lot, packed with new autos ready for shipping to hundreds of prospective owners across the country. Each car seems, on close inspection, to disappear in a haze of air-brushed paint, a convincing visual equivalent for the air surrounding a modern factory on a humid day.

This image of manufactured products ready for sale contains the paradox of



Installation view

the industrial system; its standardization, rationalization, and specialization of tasks result in thousands of identical automobiles that will become an important part of the lives of many individuals. We need automobiles, and they are so much a part of our lives that we can scarcely think of doing without them. But today the thrill of buying a new automobile must be weighed against insurance rates, crowded highways, congested cities, polluted air, blighted suburbs, and dependence on foreign oil supplies. The auto symbolizes man’s ability to dominate nature as well as his inability to foresee or control the results of his technology. Choices made on the huge industrial scale implied in Han’s painting preclude future choices or options in planning, transportation, and health. Thus, as the automobile serves us, we become subservient to it.

Art does not deal with the concrete problems posed by the automobile, and while at times it may be critical of automobiles and industries, it does not address the adverse effects of cars on America, as do environmentalists and consumer advocates. Through art, however, the social and psychological costs of devotion to the machine can be assayed. The artworks in AUTO-ICONS thus bespeak the automobile’s contradictory presence while at the same time showing how art gains expressive power by using artifacts through which society identifies itself.



Eve Sonneman, *Car Climbers*, Clovis, New Mexico, 1978  
Cibachrome photograph, 30 x 20 Courtesy Castelli Graphics



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## CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

All dimensions are in inches unless otherwise specified

JOHN CHAMBERLAIN  
1 **White Velvet**, 1962  
Steel  
81 1/2 x 61 x 54 1/2  
Whitney Museum of American Art  
Gift of the Albert A. List Family

2 **Jackpot**, 1961  
Steel  
61 x 56 x 54  
Whitney Museum of American Art  
Gift of Andy Warhol

LANGDON CLAY  
3 **Black Lib**, 1978  
Color photograph  
16 x 20  
Collection Caldecot Chubb

4 **Blind Vet**, 1978  
Color photograph  
16 x 20  
Collection Caldecot Chubb

5 **Meatball**, 1978  
Color photograph  
16 x 20  
Collection Caldecot Chubb

6. **Orange Car/Blue Wall**, 1978  
Color photograph  
16 x 20  
Collection Caldecot Chubb

DON EDDY  
7 **Private Parking #X**, 1971  
Acrylic on canvas  
66 x 95  
Collection Mr. and Mrs.  
Monroe Meyerson

WILLIAM EGGLESTON  
8. **Pink Ford**, n.d.  
Color photograph  
8 x 10  
Collection Caldecot Chubb

9 **White Door**, n.d.  
Color photograph  
16 x 20  
Collection Caldecot Chubb

10 **Mississippi**, n.d.  
Color photograph  
16 x 20  
Collection Caldecot Chubb

ROBERT FRANK  
11 **Motorama, Los Angeles**, 1956  
Black and white photograph  
8 x 10  
Courtesy Sidney Janis Gallery

12 **Covered Car,  
Long Beach, California**, 1956  
Black and white photograph  
8 x 10  
Courtesy Sidney Janis Gallery

13 **Ann Arbor, Michigan**, 1956  
Black and white photograph  
8 x 10  
Courtesy Sidney Janis Gallery

14 **Drive-In Movie, Detroit**, 1956  
Black and white photograph  
8 x 10  
Courtesy Sidney Janis Gallery

JAN GROOVER  
15 **Untitled #7323**, 1975  
Color photograph  
16 x 40  
Courtesy Sonnabend Gallery

16 **Untitled #7324**, 1975  
Color photograph  
16 x 40

HSIANG NING HAN  
17 **New Car Depot, N.J.**, 1976  
Acrylic on canvas  
68 x 144  
Courtesy O. K. Harris Works of Art

STEVE LINN  
18. **Broke Down on the Road to  
Cheyenne**, 1978  
Mixed media  
5'6"9" x 6'  
Courtesy Louis Meisel Gallery

CLAES OLDENBURG  
19 **Soft Radiator**, 1965  
Canvas filled with kapok  
32 x 24 x 18  
Collection Peder Bonnier

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG  
20 **Still (Reels [8 + C])**, 1968  
Color lithograph on paper  
31 x 23  
Lent by the artist

JAMES ROSENOQUIST  
21 **Sketch for Auto Cover**, 1971  
Mixed media  
15 1/4 x 22 1/4  
Courtesy Mr. and Mrs. Arthur  
Steinman

22 **Highway**, 1977  
Oil on canvas  
60 x 144  
Courtesy Mr. Morris Miller

JOHN SALT  
23 **Purple Impala**, 1973  
Oil on canvas  
43 1/2 x 64  
Courtesy O. K. Harris Works of Art

JASON SELEY  
24. **Masculine Presence**, 1961  
Steel  
7'2" x 48"  
The Museum of Modern Art  
Gift of Dr. & Mrs. Leonard Kornblee

EVE SONNEMAN  
25 **Car Climbers,  
Clovis, New Mexico**, 1978  
Cibachrome photograph  
30 x 20  
Courtesy Castelli Graphics

26 **Low Rider's Tatoo,  
Espanola, New Mexico**, 1978  
Cibachrome photograph  
30 x 20  
Courtesy Castelli Graphics

ANDY WARHOL  
27 **Silver Car Crash**, 1963  
Silkscreen on canvas  
83 x 105  
Courtesy Gian Enzo Sperone

TOM WESSELMANN  
28 **Little Landscape #1**, 1964  
Liquitex and collage on board  
8 x 10  
Collection David B. Boyce

